MAR13-2012-020086

Abstract for an Invited Paper
for the MAR13 Meeting of
the American Physical Society

Spatially and temporally coordinated processes of cells at molecular to cellular scales

JOACHIM SPATZ, Max Planck Institute for Intelligent Systems & University of Heidelberg

Our approach to engineer cellular environments is based on self-organizing spatial positioning of single signaling molecules attached to synthetic extracellular matrices, which offers the highest spatial resolution with respect to the position of single signaling molecules. This approach allows tuning tissue with respect to its most relevant properties, i.e., viscoelasticity, peptide composition, nanotopography and spatial nanopatterning of signaling molecule. Such materials are defined as "nano-digital materials" since they enable the counting of individual signaling molecules, separated by a biologically inert background. Within these materials, the regulation of cellular responses is based on a biologically inert background which does not initiate any cell activation, which is then patterned with specific signaling molecules such as peptide ligands in well defined nanoscopic geometries. This approach is very powerful, since it enables the testing of cellular responses to individual, specific signaling molecules and their spatial ordering. We found that integrin cluster have a functional packing density which is defined by an integrin-integrin spacing of approximately 68 nanometers. We have also developed methods which allows the light initiated activation of adhesion processes by switching the chemical composition of the extracellular matrix. This enabled us to identify the frequency of leader cell formation in collective cell migration as a matter of initial cell cluster pattern size and geometry. Moreover, "nano-digital supports" such as those described herein are clearly capable of involvement in such dynamic cellular processes as protein ordering at the cell's periphery which in turn leads to programming cell responses.